

The First 114 Years of the *Cornell Alumni Magazine*

by
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and
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About the authors

<http://cornellalumnimagazine.com/john-marcham-50-1927-2014/>

<http://cornellalumnimagazine.com/a-tribute-to-jim-roberts-2/>

This brief history of the *Cornell Alumni News* and its successors was written to introduce the archival DVD collection of the Cornell Alumni News (also known as the *Cornell Magazine* and the *Cornell Alumni Magazine*).

The entire collection is also online at <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/3157>
Current issues are at: <http://cornellalumnimagazine.com>

Books and Articles Collection – <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/63>
The Internet-First University Press Directory – <https://ecommons.cornell.edu/handle/1813/64826>

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A Brief History of the *Cornell Alumni News* and Its Successors

From its first issue in 1899, Cornell University's alumni periodical has had a number of distinctions:

- owned by alumni,
- peopled by talented and colorful writers, photographers, and managers,
- able to survive receivership in the 1930s, and
- independent of the university.

by John Marcham '50, editor 1961–64, 1967–91

On April 5, 1899, a senior and an instructor in English launched the Cornell Alumni News, a newspaper for former students, one of the first eight or nine such periodicals in the United States (the College of Wooster, in Ohio, published the first in 1886).

By 1902 the circulation of the News reached 900. That year the university's graduate manager of athletics, John L. Senior 1901, invested in the paper. He hired as its paid editor Frank E. Gannett 1898, editor of the Ithaca Daily Democrat, who later founded the Gannett Newspaper Group. In 1904 they adopted a magazine format.

Alumni owned the News—as individuals, then as stockholders, and after 1939 through the Cornell Alumni Association and its successor, the Cornell Alumni Federation.

People

The most popular contributor in the first half-century was Romeyn ("Rym") Berry 1904, the last graduate manager of Cornell athletics and a former writer for the New Yorker. He headed the Cornell Athletic Association during its heyday of unbeaten football teams in the 1920s, built Schoellkopf Stadium, and suffered declines in the performance of teams until the University took over athletics during the Depression.

Berry's "Now in My Time" column appeared in the News in the 1940s and '50s; it was described best by John Detmold '43 as "pungent, usually humorous, sometimes caustic, always a delight." Berry expressed a love of the University and jousted with its critics.

Another important presence was Professor Morris Bishop '13, PhD '26, of Romance literature, a graceful author who contributed a page of campus news to the magazine. He wrote many books in his academic field and in 1962 produced the popular *A History of Cornell*. Elbert Tuttle '18 contributed as well. As a federal judge in the 1960s, he delivered landmark decisions on segregation in the South. Yet another News writer was a former Cornell Daily Sun editor, Foster Coffin '12, the University's first alumni representative and later the first director of Willard Straight Hall.

By mid-century, Robert J. Kane '34, director of athletics, wrote a regular column on Cornell sports figures, events, and politics. In retirement he headed the U.S. Olympic Committee. Notable among many fine photographers published in the News are John Troy, Margaret Bourke-White '27, Barrett Gallagher '36, and Sol Goldberg '46.

Woodford Patterson 1895 gave up a job on the New York Evening Sun to become the magazine's first full-time paid editor from 1906 until 1917, when he became university secretary. R. Warren ("Tubby") Sailor 1907, a successful salesman in Chicago, returned in 1916 to become business manager and succeeded Patterson as editor. He made his name in printing and alumni work, hiring others to do the writing. As an undergraduate he played varsity football, was a weight thrower, Phi Beta Kappa, and Sigma Xi, and started "a collection of keys that eventually made his watch chain probably the heaviest ever seen in Ithaca."

Sailor formed a succession of companies that printed the News. He wrote and published manuals on alumni work for professionals in the field and helped found the American Alumni Council, a professional organization.

Readers

Circulation was made up entirely of single subscriptions until 1947. In 1903–04, 1,500 readers subscribed, 7.5 percent of former students. By June 1916, 4,000 (13 percent) received the magazine, and in April 1924, it was 6,000 (17 percent). By 1934 the figure had fallen to 2,800 and Sailor's parent corporation went into receivership. Howard Stevenson '19, who had been part-time managing editor from 1920 to 1925, returned from a job in book publishing to operate the News, and he continued at the helm until 1960.

In 1947 Stevenson began selling group subscriptions to alumni classes for their members. These accounted for a quantum jump in circulation to 9,000 in 1949, 18 percent of former undergraduates. By this time the News was one of only three or four unsubsidized alumni magazines in the country.

The News's original offices were downtown. From the 1940s until recent years, Cornell provided housing on campus and later near the county airport. In 2003 the offices returned downtown, to a location on East State Street, with rent paid by the University.

From 1958 to 1974, the University deducted a sum from each student's matriculation fee to send the magazine to each alumnus for several years after graduation, to help start alumni class organizations. Circulation rose to 23,000 by 1961 (31 percent of former undergraduates); then 41,473 (48 percent) in January 1969; but dropped back to 32,685 (34 percent) by the magazine's 75th anniversary in 1974.

In its first year, \$2 bought a total of 248 pages of a 10-1/2 x 15-inch newspaper. By its 75th anniversary, \$9.50 bought 704 pages in a magazine format.

Challenges

The original Cornell Alumni News set itself three goals, which continue to guide the magazine:

- To reflect "the present life at the University,"
- To "keep the alumni informed . . . about the whereabouts and doings of Cornell men and women," and
- To keep alumni informed "concerning the attitude of the University body, students, and faculty toward the various questions of University policy."

As noted in the News's 75th anniversary issue in 1975, "attitudes" were of interest in 1899, and Cornell has continued to be a rough and tumble place, made up of otherwise-minded people.

The idea of independent, self-financed alumni and student activities remained strong at Ivy League schools, and Cornell in particular, for many years: in athletics, a student newspaper, magazines, a radio station, theater and musical groups, and enterprises like Student Agencies, fraternities, sororities, and

co-op houses.

From the outset, Cornell's charter provided for alumni to elect members of its Board of Trustees. The alumni group that organized elections for such trustees evolved to embrace the University's enduring class system, student recruiting, alumni clubs, fundraising, publications, employment, adult education, and other activities.

Inevitably tensions grew as universities grew, and faculty, staff, and students asked for a bigger say in their governance. In the 1960s, the civil rights and anti-war movements spilled onto college campuses and tested informal styles of university management and discipline.

Cornell's biggest test came in April 1969 with a takeover of Willard Straight Hall by a large group of black students demanding autonomy for a college of their own and a say in their discipline. After students in the takeover armed themselves, the Cornell story became a national one. Newspapers and TV stations headlined the story with graphic photographs after the occupiers marched across campus flaunting their weapons, further disruptions were threatened, and the University Faculty reversed its vote to discipline occupiers. The News hurried out its next issue, which included a twenty-one-page illustrated report on events leading up to "The Week" of turmoil and debate, and the week itself.

Once alumni received the magazine's report, the staff noticed a sharp drop-off in letters filled with blind rage, and an indication readers had come to understand some of the complexities of running Cornell in the face of threats. Everyone wondered whether alumni would continue to run class organizations, recruit students, and solicit gifts for the University. Many did. Some never returned. A number who swore to have nothing to do with Cornell changed their minds.

Alumni who continued to believe in the University increased their dedication on all fronts, and the next year the annual campaign for alumni funds set a record. The News's explanation of the takeover and its aftermath clearly helped.

Challenges to the authority of administrators and trustees in the 1960s, growth in the size and expense of a research university, and the need for more income led Cornell to become less casual about lines of authority, discipline, and the information it provided its various publics.

By the late twentieth century, alumni continued to maintain association with the ideals of a university and look more to its alumni magazine for an up-to-date, sympathetically objective picture of their alma mater.

Postscript

By Jim Roberts '71, editor and publisher 2000–present

After John Marcham's retirement in 1991, he was succeeded as editor by Steve Madden '86 in a new management structure that included Jack Krieger '49 as publisher. Madden, who had been an Alumni News intern as an undergraduate, continued the tradition of editorial independence that had been so ably advanced by Marcham, while updating the magazine's look and style. He was assisted in this task by Elsie McMillan '55, a stalwart of the editorial staff from 1973 until her death in 1999, and Stephanie Green, who began to design the Alumni News in 1986 and continues as art director today.

When Krieger departed in 1994, Madden added the title of publisher. A year later, Madden took a leave of absence for several months. He returned to the helm briefly but announced his permanent departure in the May 1996 issue; he left to accept a job as a senior editor at Sports Illustrated in New York City.

David Gibson was named editor and publisher in late 1996, the first non-Cornellian to direct the publication. He changed its name from Cornell Alumni News to Cornell Magazine, to better reflect its format and expanded viewpoint. Gibson also oversaw a major redesign that included both new graphics and new sections, including From the Hill, “a snappy rundown of campus comings and goings,” as he put it. And he revised the publication schedule, dropping from ten issues a year to six.

Under Gibson, Cornell Magazine published some of its most controversial material since the 1969 Straight Takeover coverage, including a hard-nosed look at Cornell’s mid-Nineties budgetary woes, “Between a Rock and a Hard Place” (May/June 1997), and a humorous essay on Cornell’s inferiority complex, “Are We Really the Lowest Leaves on the Ivy?” (September/October 1997); both raised the ire of quite a few administrators and alumni, including some trustees.

Although not always popular in Day Hall, Gibson’s work was greatly appreciated by his peers in the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), who showered Cornell Magazine with honors, including the Robert Sibley Award in both 1997 and 1999 as the finest alumni magazine in the country.

After David Gibson departed in the spring of 2000 for a position at Yankee Magazine, I was grateful to receive an invitation from the magazine’s alumni oversight committee to be his successor. In the subsequent eight years, we have revamped the design a couple of times, sharpened the editorial focus, and put more emphasis on electronic communication. Circulation, still based on subscriptions sold in conjunction with class dues, has hovered around 28,000 despite an ever-growing alumni body; today it represents only about 15 percent of Cornell’s undergraduate alumni.

During my tenure, there has been one more name change. In 2001, following the recommendation of a Cornell Alumni Federation task force, Cornell Magazine became Cornell Alumni Magazine to emphasize that this editorially independent publication remains one that is owned by and published for the alumni of Cornell University. May it ever be so.